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GOD IN FRANCE. HEIDEGGER'S LEGACY

PETER JONKERS

1. God in France?

Why a book about God in France? What is the justification for applying a nation-bound criterion to philosophy, especially when it addresses the question of God? After all, this issue has haunted philosophy ever since its origin and surpasses all national, linguistic and cultural boundaries. One of the reasons to opt for this approach in this book is connected with what is usually called the hermeneutic turn in philosophy. As a consequence of this, philosophy can no longer present itself as a *philosophia perennis* (eternal philosophy), claiming to transcend the limitations of time and space because of the universality of thinking and the absoluteness of its object, God. After more than a century of heated debates on the legitimacy of this claim, most contemporary philosophers have come to the awareness that philosophizing is always done by someone and, therefore, always embedded in specific situations and contexts. This inevitable contextuality is also involved when philosophers approach the question of God, whether in France or in any other country. The French thinkers, introduced in this book, obviously share this awareness: their thinking about God is situated in a specific cultural, philosophical, and religious environment. On the other hand, this context also creates a kind of common universe of discourse; it gives colour to the lively discussions in which these thinkers are engaged, both through their work and personal contacts. With the book *God in France*, we want to map out this French universe of discourse and give an account of the discussions going on in it by analyzing the thoughts and ideas of a number of the most important participants specifically concerning the themes of God and religion.

Subsequently, the question arises why this book deals with French thinking specifically, and not German, English or Italian. What is the relevance of this focus? Moreover, this book does not offer an introduction to French thinking as such, but discusses a number of leading contemporary philosophers who, in spite of all the differences between them, are apparently engaged in thinking and writing about God and

religion. How should we interpret this engagement, which is quite unexpected from the perspective of the dominant trends in post-war twentieth century? Is it purely coincidental or is it a sign of something else? Of course, the authors of the various chapters of this book will have to make clear the relevance of the thinkers they discuss. But as a first, tentative indication, I want to point to the following. While studying these philosophies, one is struck by their sensitivity to classic religious questions, e.g., what is the way in which God in Himself and His relation to the world can be conceived? how we can name the Unnameable? etc. One should notice, however, that most of the thinkers discussed in this book approach these age-old religious issues from a philosophical perspective. In fact, they use religious ideas in a *heuristic* way: they are convinced that both the content of these ideas and the way in which they are understood in religion can shed new light on important philosophical questions. As such, this heuristic use of ideas that are external to philosophy itself is nothing new: one can think of Descartes' and Leibniz's use of mathematics as a paradigm for all true knowledge, Marx's stress on the importance of economics for a better philosophical understanding of modern society, Heidegger's use of the poems of Hölderlin to express the true sense of Being. But with regard to the thinkers being discussed in this book, the intriguing question is why they use, in an age of secularism and atheism, *religious* ideas? Furthermore, what is the philosophical point they want to make with such ideas? In this introduction, I will try to answer these questions. But besides their philosophical relevance, these interpretations of religious and theological experiences and ideas, symbols and texts also offer unexpected opportunities for a fresh approach to a lot of traditional, sometimes almost forgotten, aspects of Jewish and Christian religion. Without saying that French philosophy is unique on this point, the contributors to this book want to show, nevertheless, that it offers a recognizable, renewing contribution to contemporary philosophy in general, and to philosophical and theological thinking about God and religion in particular.

Of course, the bond between the philosophers gathered in this book largely exceeds their common interest in a current philosophical and religious issue. They all have been educated in a long French tradition of thought, including classical philosophers like Descartes, Malebranche, Pascal, and Bergson, and are marked by it. In the course of the twentieth century, however, a number of new ideas and concepts, most of them coming from other philosophical traditions, have enriched traditional French philosophy and given it its current form. In this introduction,

I want to pay attention, in some detail, to a few of these ideas and concepts, thereby restricting myself to those elements which are particularly relevant to the way in which these philosophers approach the issues of God and religion. In the first place, I will refer to Hegel's philosophy of the absolute spirit, Nietzsche's destruction of metaphysics and Christianity, and Husserl's phenomenology. But besides these, the philosophy of Heidegger has probably had the most profound influence on contemporary French thinking, as I will show in the next sections.¹ In this respect, I will analyze both Heidegger's critique of onto-theology and his attempt to lay bare the realm of the holy as being the only element in which the question of a 'divine God' can come up. The works of these philosophers are not only important to gain insight into the backgrounds of contemporary French philosophy, but also mark current thinking about God and religion in general.

From a wider perspective, one could even argue that, on the one hand, Hegel's idea of thinking the whole of reality, including thinking itself, in terms of a manifestation of the absolute idea which realizes itself through this process and, on the other hand, Nietzsche's radical undermining of the same, make up the concise, philosophical expressions of two fundamental orientations of modern culture. In some sense, they define the domain in which our ideas and concepts of truth and reality, humans and their values receive their content and shape. Therefore, it is not surprising that the philosophers addressed in this book do not want to separate themselves from the profound insights of these great philosophers, who, paradoxically, are all of German origin. On the contrary, they absorb them by interpreting them in their own, French way.

Hegel's philosophy can, for good reasons, be seen as the apogee of metaphysical thinking about God or the Absolute. He states that "the task that touches the interest of philosophy most nearly at the present moment [is] to put God back again at the peak of philosophy, the unique *principium essendi* and *cognoscendi* [principle of Being and knowledge], after all this time in which he has been put *beside* other finite things."² To put it in an even more fundamental way, the only content of

¹ For a penetrating analysis in support of my thesis on the importance of Heidegger for French philosophy cf. D. Janicaud, *Heidegger en France. I. Récit*. Paris, Albin Michel, 2001, pp. 478-489.

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke. Band 4, Jenaer kritische Schriften*. Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1968, p. 179 [*Between Kant and Hegel. Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*. Albany, SUNY, 1985, p. 299]. See also: G.W.F. Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke. Band II, Wissenschaft der Logik, erster Band*. Hamburg, Felix Meiner, 1978, p. 38.

philosophy is to think the self-movement of the Absolute or the complete self-revelation of God as a necessary, systematically coherent whole. This becomes pre-eminent clear in the *Science of Logic* (*Wissenschaft der Logik*) in which Hegel develops the basic concepts of thinking, which are at the same time the fundamental categories of reality. Precisely because the whole point of this science is to think *basic* concepts, it cannot take things too easy by just stating them or 'finding' them in an empirical and coincidental way. On the contrary, these fundamental categories can only derive their foundational character from being developed in a systematic, necessary way from an absolute ground, *viz.*, God or the absolute idea. The completion of this movement coincides with the return to its origin. Philosophy, being the only science that is able to think the unfolding of the absolute idea in all its necessary moments, is therefore the only real science. It appears as a closed whole in which essentially everything can be understood. For all these reasons, Hegel's *Science of Logic* is both ontology, science of Being, and theology, science of God.³ The importance of Hegel's system and, particularly, the *Logic* in the history of Western philosophy leads to the conclusion that the whole of western metaphysics is dominated by an onto-theological structure. According to Heidegger, this philosophical project reaches its apex in Hegel's philosophy; its full material and cultural realization is technology, which plays a preponderant role in contemporary western society.

Nietzsche's aphoristic writings can be read as the most radical undermining of Hegel's project, his philosophical 'science'. The significance of Nietzsche's work for contemporary French philosophy can hardly be overestimated. In his view, subject and object, God and the world are but 'fictions and interpretations, the visible outcome of a hidden will to power. Metaphysics is a kind of *'Hinterwelt'*, the establishment of an imaginary, 'true' or 'divine' world (cfr. Plato's world of ideas) *behind* ('*hinter*') the real world ('*Welt*') of physical powers in which mankind is actually living. From this perspective, Christianity, which avows its faith in this *Hinterwelt* and links a morality of asceticism and denial of the world with it, is nothing but 'Platonism of the people'. Nietzsche recapitulates his refusal of God and religion in the well-known slogan 'God

³ This reading of Hegel is to a large extent inspired by Heidegger. Cf. M. Heidegger, *Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik*. In: *Idem, Identität und Differenz*. Pfullingen, Neske, 1957, pp. 31ff. [M. Heidegger, *The onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics*. In: *Idem, Identity and difference*. New York: Harner, 1969, pp. 42ff.]

is dead'. The word 'God' not only stands for Christian religion, but also, more generally, for the whole universe of eternal truths, of univocal references to an objective world, of fixed values towards which man can orientate his life, and of stable social relations. In sum, 'God' stands for everything humans can rely on for their orientation in life. Only when, as is the case in modern culture, this whole reliable universe has reached the end of its life cycle, do humans fully realize the tragedy of its existence. In combination with Freud's rejection of religion as an infantile projection, Nietzsche's ideas have doubtlessly been the most 'fruitful' breeding ground for atheism, which dominates contemporary culture. His 'hammering' at Christian religion has made both philosophical and religious discourse about God a highly precarious, and for many people even implausible, enterprise. It inevitably determines to a large extent the intellectual climate in which all humans, including the philosophers of this book, are living and thinking. In particular, this means that they all, in one way or another, accept atheism as a given element of contemporary culture, implying that they will have to pass through it in order to be able to bring up God in their thinking.

The last philosopher in this line of thinking is Husserl and his phenomenological method. Almost all French philosophers of the twentieth century have been influenced by Husserl. Generally speaking, phenomenology means the theory or study of appearances. In principle, it can examine all kinds of appearances. In this sense, phenomenology of religion studies in an empirical way the phenomenon of religion, which implies that it does not ask for its transcendent origin. Ricoeur uses the term phenomenology in this way.⁴ However, Husserl's phenomenology diverges from this empirical approach, since he focuses on the phenomenon of appearing as such. Phenomenology describes consciousness, departing from its orientation to something: consciousness is not a closed entity, but is always consciousness of something. Technically formulated, this implies that phenomenology focuses on intentionality. Particularly through the reception of Husserl's work by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology has earned an important place in post-war French philosophy. Philosophers like Ricoeur, Derrida, Levinas, Henry, and Marion have studied Husserl's writings thoroughly and make use of the phenomenological method in various ways. But in the work of some of them an important shift takes place with regard to their conception of phenomenology. They criticize the central role of intentionality in

⁴ Cf. The contribution of Theo de Boer on Ricoeur.

Husserl's phenomenology, thus initiating a new, non-intentional phenomenology. Especially where the question of God is concerned, the primacy of intentionality leads to the insurmountable problem that God can only be thought as the one to which consciousness orients itself, as if He were a counterpart of man. But then the question arises whether the God of revelation, the God of the faithful, and of the theologian addresses Himself to us rather than the other way round?

2. A turn to religion?

The theme that the authors in this book are examining, and which makes up its systematic core, also asks for some explanation. Traditionally, in philosophy the issue of God comes up in the context of a specific part of metaphysics, *viz.*, natural theology. In this discipline, philosophers think with the help of natural reason only, that is to say, without appealing to (supernatural) revelation and all kinds of theological premises, about questions like the relation between the contingency of the world and God as its absolute ground, the rationality of a governing, providential principle in the world, the sense of human freedom in relation to God's absoluteness, etc. Generally speaking, natural theology rests on the presupposition that there is an analogy of being between our philosophical ideas about (the basic structures of) the world as such and God as its absolute ground. Since Heidegger, this approach is usually called onto-theology. In the previous section, we saw that Hegel's philosophy is generally considered as the fulfillment of this kind of metaphysics. After Hegel, philosophy has taken a completely different direction and even explicitly turned away from dialectically comprehending the Absolute Spirit towards a thinking of reality from the perspective of the material infrastructure (Marx), the individual (Kierkegaard), the will to power (Nietzsche), or the positive sciences (positivism). This tendency was already apparent in the philosophies of the second half of the nineteenth century, but it only became a general trend in twentieth-century philosophy. To take (again) the example of Heidegger, he is deeply impressed by the force of Hegel's philosophy and the monumental character of his conceptual system. But, on the other hand, he explicitly refuses to be carried away by the dialectical movement of Hegel's philosophy in which all negativity, obscurity, and externality is eventually 'sublated' in a complete manifestation of the Absolute. Heidegger tries, in other words, to overcome metaphysics as onto-theology by taking 'a step

back'. In this way, he wants to lead thinking outside onto-theology, which, ever since Plato, has been the unquestioned essence of western thinking. In this way, he wants to clear the way for what has remained unthought in metaphysics.

Numerous twentieth-century French philosophers carry out a similar movement, to a large extent, under the influence of the pertinent questions raised by Heidegger. They, too, consider Hegel's system as the fulfillment of the project of reason to penetrate into the essence of reality in all its necessary coherence. But, just like Heidegger, they want to deconstruct this ideal of rationality by calling for attention to all kinds of inevitable, but hardly noticed, interruptions of this project. They point to an externality which cannot be integrated in thinking, to a deferment of what thinking considers to be objectively present to the mind's eye, to the dissemination of what intellectual intuition tries to grasp at a glance, to strategies of indirect speech in order (not) to speak about God, etc. However, these philosophers do not consider their critique of metaphysics in general, and of natural theology in particular to be the definitive verdict about man's capacity to speak philosophically about God. They not only see new opportunities to speak about God outside or at least in the margin of traditional metaphysics, but also testify with their work to a philosophical urgency to do so. This is not the result of a kind of apologetic need to save (faith in) God in these 'godforsaken' times. Rather, they consider the way in which the Bible and Christian mystics speak about God as showing a sensitivity to a radical mystery, which, time and again, eludes notice of traditional metaphysics in spite of just because of its thinking force. This sensitivity serves for them as a heuristic means to get a glimpse of aspects of truth and Being, man and values across metaphysical thinking. Therefore, they give expression to this mystery in their philosophies: it helps them to free philosophical thinking of the dominance of instrumental, technical, 'totalizing' rationality and its all too visible consequences in contemporary society. These age-old sources of (Christian) religion testify to a persistent search for God as the radical Other, in combination with an extremely critical reserve with regard to any result that wants to present itself as definitive.

Most of the authors presented in this book not only take a distance from the traditional metaphysical discourse about God, but also see themselves as *philosophers*, not as theologians or religious authors. Therefore, they take a rather distanced attitude with regard to religion and theology as such. As the next chapters will show, this distance varies individually. One of the authors, J. -Y. Lacoste, is a (Roman

Catholic) theologian. There is a chapter on his work in this primarily philosophical book because his theology is heavily dependent on the philosophical insights which are discussed in the other chapters of this book, especially those of Heidegger and Marion. But the large majority of the authors being discussed in this book are philosophers. Some of them, like Ricoeur, Girard, Levinas, and Marion, want to contribute to philosophy of religion, and personally profess Christianity or Judaism. This (implicitly or explicitly) gives colour to their thinking, without implying that they want to be theologians. For example, it is often shown that Judaism colours Levinas's thinking, but he himself repeatedly stressed the strictly philosophical character of his work and refused to be considered as a religious author. Other philosophers, in contrast, like Derrida and Lyotard, have a much more atypical and contrary relation with religion, and are not concerned at all about the religious consequences of their work. In any case, this means that, generally speaking, their use of religious ideas and concepts is not so much for the sake of religion as such, but is primarily motivated by their *philosophical* interest. For all these reasons, it seems to me incorrect to interpret the attention of contemporary (French) philosophy for God and religion as a turn to religion or theology, as some do.⁵

According to Dominique Janicaud, French phenomenology has made a clear shift, taking it to a metaphysico-theological context. Whereas at first, under the influence of Sartre's interpretation of Husserl, the transcendental ego was the central focus of phenomenology, the attention of French phenomenologists shifted after the second World War to themes that break open the classic idea of intentionality. To give an example of this, the later Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of intertwining (*entrelacs*) as a metaphor to show that everything visible is embraced in a latency that is the flesh of things.⁶ But above all, he breaks the one-way movement implied by Husserlian intentionality. 'Looking at' is always 'being looked at' as well. Levinas also becomes a critic of Husserl. He stresses the unconditional externality of the Other, thus surpassing the boundaries of intentionality. According to Janicaud, the direction taken by these ways of thinking shows that they are motivated by a non-phenomenological,

⁵ Cf. D. Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*. Combas, Editions de l'Éclat, 1991 [D. Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"*: *The French Debate*. New York, Fordham University Press, 2000]. H. de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*. Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1999.

⁶ D. Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*, p. 13 [D. Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn"*, p. 24].

'metaphysical' desire. He states that this turn presupposes a metaphysico-theological montage prior to philosophical writing.⁷ For Levinas, the radical Other is not a purely philosophical concept, but has also a trace of the God of the Bible within him. In this way, theology enters French phenomenology. But the introduction of this extraneous element implies that the Husserlian patterns of thought no longer determine the course of this kind of philosophy. It has become a phenomenology of what does *not* show itself. After Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, Marion and Henry have continued the so-called 'theological turn of phenomenology'; Marion stresses the original givenness of every phenomenon, and Henry subordinates the classic phenomenological description of the phenomenon to the essence of phenomenality.⁸

Well, Janicaud is obviously right when he states that post-war French phenomenology has taken a much more critical attitude towards the primacy of the transcendental ego, and thus took a completely different direction in comparison to Sartre and the early Merleau-Ponty. But I question his qualification of this development as a theological turn.⁹ It goes without saying that important notions in twentieth-century French philosophy — like the flesh, the intrusion of the other in the self, Heidegger's turning (*Kehre*) and Marion's interpretation of it, and the analogy between phenomenality and the absolute put forward by Henry — doubtlessly relate phenomenology to all kinds of questions, which traditionally belong to the field of metaphysics. But, for several reasons, the introduction of these notions cannot and should not be interpreted as a 'metaphysico-theological montage'. First of all, this interpretation puts the philosophical analysis of these notions on par with natural theology, thus uncritically mixing up philosophy with religion and onto-theology. This is especially untenable with regard to the philosophers that Janicaud discusses in support of his interpretation. Of all the points that these philosophers have in common, their persistent attempt to develop a thinking of transcendence that departs from strictly philosophical points of view and their explicit aim to keep it as far away as possible from

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15 [*Ibid.*, p. 27].

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20 [*Ibid.*, p. 32–34].

⁹ At least as far as Henry is concerned, but also more in general, Janicaud finds this theological turn highly problematic. His challenge does not bear on Henry's quite respectable spiritual intention, often of an admirable tenor, "but on his strange stubbornness to install this research (essentially fragile and secret, if not esoteric) at the centre of a disciplinary apparatus whose principles are all formulated in precisely the rational, unifying, Western terms intended to be challenged. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 21 [*Ibid.*, p. 32].

onto-theology and apologetics, are probably the most important ones. Moreover, Janicaud's reproach of a metaphysico-theological montage fails to recognize that these thinkers really try to renew philosophy. This renewal consists in asking, from a *philosophical* perspective, whether there can be a givenness which goes *beyond* onto-theology, transcending our (power of) thinking, but which at the same time moves us most profoundly and throws us out of balance.

Hent de Vries uses the expression 'the turn to religion' mainly as the title for a new philosophical platform: it does not so much offer an interpretation of recent developments in contemporary philosophy, but rather urges philosophers to make a turn to religion. De Vries comes to this suggestion on the authority of Derrida, or more specifically, from his essay *Faith and Knowledge: the Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Mere Reason* (*Foi et savoir: les deux sources de la 'religion' aux limites de la simple raison*), to which he attributes an exemplary position in the contemporary philosophical landscape.¹⁰ It would be naïve and illusory to think that the sort of religion to which De Vries wants to return in his book has any reference "to a historical presence, to a delimitable body of writings, or to an intellectual or emotional category that at some time or other may have had the potential of somehow and somewhere remaining itself or intact, regardless of its apparent metamorphoses."¹¹ Nevertheless, particularly in the work of Derrida and Levinas, he recognizes a lot of motives of thought that can be characterized as religious. The purpose of these (decidedly critical, non-dogmatic and even heterodox) motives is to:

...illuminate the unthought, unsaid, or unseen of a philosophical logos that, not only in the guise of modern reason, but from its earliest deployment, tends to forget, repress, or sublate the very *religio* (*relegere, religare*, or relation without relation, as Levinas and, following him, Derrida, would have it) to which these motives testify [...since] the apparent negativity of the unthought (and unsaid or unseen) seeks refuge in the idiom and practices of the positive religions, especially in the most heterodox of their offshoots, those epitomized by negative or apophatic theology, mysticism, messianism, and apocalypics.¹²

All this shows that De Vries's turn to religion should be interpreted as a way to describe philosophy's renewed attention for all kinds of otherness, which (traditional) philosophical thinking is unable to conceive.

All speaking and writing includes an *à* — *Dieu*, a structural orientation towards the totally other or towards the radically singular, that is to say towards 'God' or whatever is coming instead of this figure (term, reference). This path is more plausible and effective than the alleged secularisms, humanisms, and fideisms, which paralyze philosophy, because they deprive it of the idea of otherness. However, the idea that all discourse includes an *à* — *Dieu* implies the awareness that it is also accompanied by an *adieu*, a farewell to all well-known onto-theological names and concepts of the divine. In other words, a patient attention for God's radical otherness, as becomes manifest in religion, and a farewell to onto-theology go hand in hand. De Vries considers the turn to religion conceived in this way as the essential task for contemporary philosophy.

In his book, De Vries offers a fine analysis of the *philosophical* reasons for contemporary thinking to be interested in all kinds of religious questions. I agree with him that these reasons have to do with difficulties caused by instrumental or technical rationality which have become apparent in our time. But I do not think that the reasons for numerous French (and also foreign) philosophers to be interested in religious issues can be interpreted as a *turn to religion*. By doing so, De Vries unifies all kinds of heterogeneous movements in contemporary (French) philosophy under the heading of a turn to religion. In this way, he seems to deny the crucial differences between the thinkers that come up in his book and also in this book. The attention to religion and/or God revealed in Ricoeur's works is completely different from Levinas and Marion, which profoundly differs from the attention Derrida and Lyotard give to religion and God. Moreover, the ways in which these thinkers do or do not relate to religious traditions is also very diverse, as I have shown above.

This brings me to a second problem. De Vries can only maintain his argument that in contemporary (French) philosophy there is a turn to religion because he explicitly detaches the concept of religion from any personal engagement in a religious conviction, and reduces religious traditions to a semantic and symbolic archive, which can be, to a great extent, formalized and transposed into concepts and philosophemes. If one agrees with De Vries's argument, what, then, is left of the religious character of this kind of religion? In his approach, religion is being restricted to something within the limits of philosophical reason alone. Only those religious aspects, which can be formalized and caught in concepts and philosophemes, find favour in the eyes of philosophical reason. However, the question arises whether this rationally enlightened

¹⁰ H. de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, p. 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

approach (including a reductionism and formalism with regard to religion) violates religion itself. Is it possible to detach 'religion' from its connection with a specific religious tradition and community, from its being embedded in a ritual praxis, from its concrete moral do's and don'ts? Paradoxically, the objection of De Vries, and some other contemporary philosophers, to classical onto-theology boomerangs. One of Heidegger's pertinent criticisms of metaphysics as onto-theology was that it used an idea of God that had become completely detached from living (Christian) religion, from which metaphysics implicitly or explicitly drew its inspiration. To the God as *causa sui* ('cause of himself' as being one of the most classic examples of the onto-theological conception of God) "man can neither pray nor sacrifice [...]. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god."¹³ So read Heidegger's harsh reproach to metaphysics as onto-theology. This is the reason why he is asking for a 'divine' god. But doesn't this reproach apply as much to De Vries's formalized concept of religion? In sum, both De Vries's book and this one draw attention to a fascinating process taking place in contemporary (French) philosophy; however, I disagree on whether or not to interpret this process as a turn to religion.

So, although in my view it is at least premature and probably incorrect to speak of a turn to religion or to theology, the publications of Janicaud and De Vries show that, in fact, there is growing attention for questions with regard to God and religion. But if this is not a turn to religion, how should this new attention be interpreted since, from the perspective of the dominant trends in post-war philosophy, it in no way speaks for itself? We only need to think of humanistic existentialism, which was not only an expression of radical, philosophical atheism, but which in a more general sense contributed to the atheistic climate that prevailed in intellectual circles both in France and abroad. In his pamphlet *Existentialism and Humanism* (*L'existentialisme est un humanisme*), Sartre argues that a choice in favour of man necessarily implies a choice against God. In particular, the existence of a creating God can in no way be combined with human freedom. The point of departure of existentialism is subjectivity.¹⁴ This implies that man has no pre-given content or

¹³ M. Heidegger, 'Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik', p. 70 [M. Heidegger, *The onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics*, p. 72].

¹⁴ J.-P. Sartre, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*. Paris, Gallimard, 1996 (reprint), p. 26.

definition of his essence, but is absolute freedom and indeterminacy. Therefore, human existence differs radically from the way in which things are, which are made on the basis of a concept and with an eye to a certain goal. In the case of man, his free existence precedes any definition of his essence; he only defines himself on the basis of an absolutely free, autonomous project of existence. If not, he is inauthentic and acts in bad faith. Thus, man fully 'invents' himself and is fully responsible for this self-invention.¹⁵ Such a view on man and his freedom obviously excludes the existence of God, for if a creating God did exist, he would have created man according to a pre-given project (the eternal human nature or essence as, e.g., Aristotle says), in the same way as when a human makes things on the basis of a given concept. But thus He would annihilate what makes humans truly human, viz., their free self-determination! Therefore the existence of God is in flagrant contradiction to the authentic existence of man, for whom his existence precedes any definition of his essence. If God exists, man is nothing; if man exists.... In short, existentialist humanism, the choice of man in favour of man, is necessarily a form of atheism.

Merleau-Ponty's position with regard to the possibility of combining the existence of God with human freedom is subtler, but also more ambiguous than Sartre's. He states that if God is understood as the one and only source of sense, having established beforehand the sense of the universe as such, then He chokes the contingent, free process of man giving sense to the world. "Recourse to an absolute foundation destroys the very thing it is supposed to support."¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty compares this absolute source of sense with someone possessing 'a notebook of the master', in which the solutions to all human problems are given beforehand.¹⁷ As a result of this, the earnestness and gravity, which are so characteristic for every human decision, disappear. Human existence thus inevitably becomes a pointless game.

As is common knowledge, in the course of the last quarter of the twentieth century, structuralism somehow replaced existentialism as the dominant trend in French philosophy. Basically, structuralism accuses

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁶ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le métaphysique dans l'homme*. In: Idem, *Sens et non-sens*. Paris, Nagel, 1966, p. 166 [M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Metaphysical in Man*. In: Idem, *Sens and Non-Sense*. Evanston (Illinois), Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 95].

¹⁷ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eloge de la philosophie*. Paris, Gallimard, 1953, p. 53 [M. Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy*. Evanston (Illinois), Northwestern University Press, 1963, p. 45].

existentialism of being a theology in reverse in so far as existentialism had simply substituted God for the subject, attributing to the latter the same central position which used to be the exclusive privilege of God. However, this critique of the 'anthropotheistic' character of existentialist humanism certainly did not involve at all that structuralism would take a more positive attitude towards God and religion. Rather, the anthropologically and morally motivated atheism of existentialism gave way to a (less militant) scientifically orientated atheism. This is the main argument of the influential book of Jean Lacroix on *The Sense of Modern Atheism* (*Le sens de l'athéisme moderne*). In his view, "the systematic and one-sided use of the structuralist method is only possible on the basis of atheistic presuppositions or at least develops an atheistic mentality."¹⁸ When man is eliminated from scientific thinking, God goes out of sight as well. The structuralist method does not consider man to be the unique bearer and source of sense, but approaches him only as a replaceable element in a heterogeneous and discontinuous field of forces. He does not bring about any meaning himself, but *is being* constituted as a contingent and passing element, as a way in which this field temporary and contingently has organized itself. On the same grounds, structuralism criticizes the concept of God as the transcendental referent of all thinking and acting, as the one who could order and structure this network. It rejects God as an illusion of consciousness on the basis that man naively considers all conscious thinking and acting only to be possible if there were a God guaranteeing the pre-established harmony of the world and the referentiality of our language. Thus, from the proposition that existentialist humanism is *ipso facto* atheistic, one should not jump to the conclusion that a structuralist critique of this kind of humanism would offer new prospects for philosophical and theological thinking about God. On the contrary, together with the annihilation of the idea of the subject as the autonomous source of sense, structuralism has also let God disappear from the philosophical and intellectual scene.

In conclusion, we can say that the philosophical trends that have been discussed in this section, and which dominated, to a large extent, French thinking during the second half of the twentieth century, are at odds with the present philosophical attention for God and religion. This still leaves unanswered the question of how this interest can be explained.

¹⁸ J. Lacroix. *Le sens de l'athéisme moderne*. Paris. Casternan. 1969⁶, p. 75.

3. The modern indecision about God

Without the pretension of offering a complete answer to the intriguing question of the reasons for the contemporary philosophical interest in God and religion, I want to propose an interpretation that focuses on an important common feature of French philosophy. In particular, I want to interpret this attention as an attempt to find a solution to some major problems of our culture, specifically concerning our understanding of man and Being, truth and values, as they have been elaborated by Heidegger, in particular.¹⁹ We are living in an age in which the influence of technical, economical — in short, instrumental — rationality has become so dominant that it jeopardizes the essence of man as a relational being, the world as the sphere of our existence, truth and value as something entrusted to us, etc. In this situation, the question is how to overcome the dominance of this kind of rationality and the practical effects it produces. A radical rejection of present-day society and culture is no option since that would only strengthen the dominance of instrumental rationality. In order to answer this crucial question, leading contemporary philosophers like Habermas, Taylor, Rorty, and others try out divergent approaches. This variety also holds true for the French philosophers discussed in this book. Nevertheless, their ways of dealing with this question have a common characteristic: in order to deconstruct modernity and develop new, non-instrumental ways of thinking and experiencing, they appeal to elements of religious traditions that always have been at odds with modernity.

I will clarify my point by departing from the attitude of these philosophers towards Heidegger's deconstruction of modern technology and his attempt to overcome the actual dominance of 'calculative thinking', of truth as 'certainty for a representing subject', of the world as an 'object', and of values as subjective constructions. According to Heidegger, only the development of a non-representing, commemorative thinking of Being is capable of doing this. In his view, modern technology does not

¹⁹ In accordance with Heidegger, I use these four key words to indicate the basic elements of every age, and thus also of modernity. In his view, every age is founded on a fundamental metaphysical position, which embraces: "(1) The manner and way in which man is man, that is, himself [...]. (2) The essential interpretation of the being of beings. (3) The essential projection of truth. (4) The sense in which, in any given instance, 'man is the measure'." Cf. M. Heidegger, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*. In: Idem, *Holzwege*. Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1963⁴, p. 95 [M. Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*. In: Idem, *Off the beaten track*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 79].

stand alone, but is only the visible realization of a more fundamental metaphysical position, which he identifies with calculative thinking in terms of subject and object, and with onto-theology. So, Heidegger's attempt to overcome the dominance of technology by paving the way for a commemorative thinking goes hand in hand with his deconstruction of (traditional) metaphysics and his preparation of a non-onto-theological approach to God or, rather, to the gods. With regard to these two issues, Heidegger has influenced contemporary French philosophy profoundly. Even a superficial knowledge of the works of authors like Ricoeur, Girard, Levinas, Derrida, Henry, Marion, Lyotard, and Lacoste suffices to see that they contain a lot of explicit and implicit references to his work. However, their attitude towards Heidegger is very ambivalent. On the one hand, they agree with his critique of onto-theology; on the other hand, they criticize and deconstruct his attempt to prepare a new way of thinking the divine and the divinity situated within the domain of Being.²⁰ Of course, the stake and the result of these critiques and deconstructions differ individually, as the next chapters will show. Nevertheless, their ambivalent attitude towards Heidegger constitutes an important common motive which needs closer examination. Thus, the question that unites the thinkers discussed in this book is how to relate to both the mysterious attraction and repulsion which Heidegger's work brings about. In this respect, the central systematic question is whether his attempt to overcome calculative thinking by developing a commemorative thinking, including a thinking of God beyond the boundaries of onto-theology, is eventually successful. Or, is this attempt, in spite of itself, stuck in a problematic ontology and theology which, in turn, needs to be deconstructed?

In his essay, *The Age of the World Picture* (*Die Zeit des Weltbildes*), Heidegger tries to think the essence of modernity which, in his view, also includes the present time. He mentions several, interrelated characteristics which make up the typically modern aspect of modernity. First of all, there is the rise of the new, mathematically based science, and the transformation of praxis to machine technology. Other characteristics of modernity are art moving into the purview of aesthetics, implying that the artwork becomes an object of experience, and culture becoming the realization of the highest values through the care and cultivation of man's highest goods. To us, a fifth element of modernity is especially important: Heidegger refers to it with the term 'loss of the gods' (*Entgötterung*). He describes it as follows:

This expression [the loss of the gods] does not mean the mere elimination of the gods, crude atheism. The loss of the gods is a twofold process. On the one hand, the world picture Christianizes itself inasmuch as the ground of the world is posited as infinite and unconditioned, as the absolute. On the other hand, Christendom reinterprets its Christianity as a world view (the Christian world view) and thus makes itself modern and up to date. The loss of the gods is the condition of indecision about God and the gods. Christianity is chiefly responsible for bringing it about. But the loss of the gods is far from excluding religiosity. Rather, it is on its account that the relation to the gods is transformed into religious experience. When this happens, the gods have fled. The resulting void is filled by the historical and psychological investigation of myth.²¹

What does Heidegger mean by loss of the gods, and what consequences does it have for contemporary thinking about God and religion? First of all, it is important to distinguish the loss of the gods from atheism as well as from secularization. The term secularization is primarily used by the social sciences, referring to the (empirically observable) process of social and cultural differentiation which gradually takes place in modernity. As a consequence of this, the close bond between the whole universe and God as its origin and ultimate goal, and the immersion of all spheres of existence in an all-embracing religious order, which was characteristic of the pre-modern period, has vanished. Heidegger, however, uses the term 'loss of the gods' in order to indicate a philosophical interpretation of the dramatic changes that took place during modernity with regard to the relation between God and the world, the holy and the secular. Modern phenomena, such as social differentiation and autonomous science, can only emerge *after* Being is no longer experienced and understood as *ens creatum* (created being), but has become a calculable object, standing alone. Similarly, these phenomena can only come up *after* man has posited his own subjectivity as the unique point of reference for all truth, and has defined the latter as objective certainty. Therefore, the loss of the gods should not be understood from the perspective of secularization, but the other way round; secularization is but a concrete manifestation of the loss of the gods.

Analogously, the loss of the gods should be distinguished from atheism, the elimination of the gods. Atheism, as we understand it nowadays, does not stand alone, but is dependent on so-called theism for its name, meaning and opponents. The term theism only appeared at the

²¹ M. Heidegger, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*, p. 70 [M. Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, p. 58].

²⁰ Cf. D. Janicand *Heidegger en France I*, no. 478-9.

beginning of modernity, referring to a strictly philosophical approach to God. It sets itself up as the discipline that is capable of proving the existence of a personal God on the basis of a purely rational argumentation, without appealing to revelation. It is only from this time on that atheism, in the strict sense of the word, could emerge since, essentially, atheism is the negation of theism. It is a philosophical trend that makes use of the same strictly rational arguments as theism, but with the intent of criticizing it, e.g., by showing that the proofs for God existence do not rest on a solid argumentative bases.²² Well, with the term 'loss of the gods' Heidegger is referring to an issue that precedes the whole question of theism and atheism: he wonders what change in the relation between God and (philosophical) thinking has made both theism and atheism possible. In fact, they correspond in their transformation of God to an object of representing reasoning. When this occurs, the gods have already fled. Thus, analogous to what was said about secularization, the loss of the gods is not a consequence of atheism, but the other way round; atheism (just like theism) only becomes possible after the loss of the gods.

What is the essence of the loss of the gods? As the cited passage from Heidegger's essay indicates, it is a twofold process in which, on the one hand, the world picture christianizes and, on the other hand, Christendom reinterprets its Christianity as a world view. The christianization of the world picture becomes apparent in what Heidegger calls elsewhere the onto-theological structure of metaphysics. Characteristic for modernity is that philosophy took a new turn and orientated itself for its ideal of knowing to the model of exact science. At first, mathematics, and somewhat later physics, became the paradigm of all well-founded, certain knowledge. According to this paradigm, philosophy understands Being as ground, while thinking gathers itself towards Being as its ground in the manner of giving ground and accounting for the ground.²³ Thus, this ground is the ultimate principle on the basis of which the whole of reality can be understood as something radically coherent and transparent. Of course, only God qualifies for being this absolute ground and, consequently, modern philosophy attributed a central position to Him. Heidegger's analysis of this process brings to light the onto-theological structure of the most prominent metaphysical systems of modernity;

²² Cf. M. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987, pp. 13ff.

²³ M. Heidegger, *Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik*, p. 48 [M. Heidegger, *The onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics*, p. 57].

concretely, we can think of Descartes' idea of the infinite, Leibniz's principle of sufficient ground, Spinoza's absolute substance, and Hegel's absolute idea.

In Heidegger's view, this turn has far-reaching consequences, not only for religion, but also for philosophy. The crucial issue here is not so much the well-known statement that the God of philosophy has become more and more at odds with the God of the Bible, but something more basic. Because modern philosophy understands God as giving ground, and also accounts for this ground, it, at the same time, takes far-reaching decisions about Being and truth. It conceives them in the light of God as ground. This means that it understands Being as grounded, i.e., as completely manifest presence without any obscurity, and truth as the result of an accounting knowledge on the basis of the availability of this last ground for the knowing subject. These interpretations of Being and truth should not be misunderstood as decisions of individual philosophers, but are made possible themselves by the fact that metaphysics as such essentially has an onto-theological structure. Ever since Plato, this tendency has slumbered in philosophy, and has only come to the fore since modernity. In any case, the modern turn to the idea of the world as a picture put an end to the fundamental openness and historicity, which originally characterized non-onto-theological (or non-metaphysical) thinking about the gods and Being. This is the christianization of the world picture: the basically open, historical and discontinuous destiny of Being as a 'coming to pass' has been reduced to a transparent, representational, objective being, grounded in God as its absolute ground which can be represented by understanding. However, the result of this process is paradoxical: when the picture of the world is christianized, as appears from the dominant position of God in the great metaphysical systems of modernity, the gods have fled and the loss of the gods has become a fact. The christianization of the world has removed the gods from the element of the holy; it has destroyed the unapproachable character of the divinity and, simultaneously, it has annihilated Being as a heterogeneous coming to pass and endless origin.

The other side of the loss of the gods is that Christendom reinterprets its Christianity as a world view. The consequence of this shift is the degradation of the all-encompassing faith in God and divine worship to a detached view of the world competing with other world views. As the title of his essay already indicates, Heidegger examines in *The Age of the World Picture* the essence of the (modern) world picture. In ordinary (German) parlance, this term has a neutral meaning, referring to some

view of or attitude towards the world. But for Heidegger, this term has a very specific and fundamental meaning. He considers the fact that the world has become a picture to be the essence of modernity. That is why, strictly speaking, it is incorrect to contrast the modern world picture with the one of the Middle Ages and of Antiquity. The interpretation of the world as a (representational) picture only becomes possible in modernity. What exactly does Heidegger mean by world picture?²⁴ Let us take a close look at both elements, world and picture, separately. Considered philosophically, the word 'world' serves here as a name for beings in their entirety. This term not only includes nature and history, but also the world-ground, no matter how its relation to the world is thought. From the perspective of the christianization of the world view analyzed above, this means that by conceiving God as giving ground, He gets involved in the sphere of representational thinking which accounts for the ground. As a result of this, He turns into something that can be represented, although his position as the absolute ground of the world is a unique one. When using the word 'picture', we spontaneously think of a copy of something, e.g., a photo or a painting. But for Heidegger, 'picture' refers to something more fundamental. When we say that we try to get a picture of something, we implicitly use this word in a normative way.²⁵ The picture or representation we make of something thus becomes, as it were, the norm or standard of the thing in itself: the matter itself stands in the way it stands to us, before us. Consequently, making a picture of something, or imagining something, does not only have to do with visualization, but also, and even more basically, with conceptualization. Moreover, this representation is not an arbitrary product, but is something present for the mind's eye in all its necessary coherence and totality, i.e., as a system. Finally, the term world picture also has the connotation of the world (Being as such) being present and available for a representing subject. "Understood in an essential way, 'world picture' does not mean 'picture of the world' but, rather, the world grasped as picture. Beings as a whole are now taken in such a way that a Being is first and only is being insofar as it is set in place by representing-producing humanity."²⁶

²⁴ M. Heidegger, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*, pp. 81ff. [M. Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, pp. 67ff.].

²⁵ This normative aspect is even more striking in the German expression "wir sind über etwas im Bilde" (we put ourselves in the picture about something). This expression constantly plays a part in Heidegger's analysis of the world picture. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 82 [*Ibid.*, p. 67].

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82 [*Ibid.*, pp. 67-8].

The interpretation of Christianity as a world view is dependent on the world having become a picture for a representing subject. Consequently, the expression 'Christian world view' only gets its sense within the framework of the (modern) world picture. In a certain way, it is the conscious, articulated expression of Christianity. World view means that man is conscious of the fact that he looks at the world from a certain, i.e., Christian perspective. He also attributes a value to his faith, perhaps even the highest value. On the basis of this conscious evaluation, he can enter into a dialogue or confrontation with other world views and other values. But all these world views and the value attributed to them are only possible under the condition that the world as such has already become a picture of which man can make an image or a view. Only against the much larger background of modernity in which man posits himself for the first time as a subject opposed to the world (as object) is he capable of observing or viewing the world in a self-conscious, detached way, of evaluating it in relation to other world views, etc. Thus, the decisive factor is not so much that in the course of modernity, Christianity has entered into a tense relationship with other religious and non-religious world views, but the fact that it has understood itself as a world view. When this occurs, Christianity has already lost its original Christian character.

Why is this so? In its earliest and (in Heidegger's view) most authentic shape, Christian religion is not a world view at all but a way of life, completely dominated by faith. The faithful experience God not only in heaven, or simply as the architect of the world, or as the highest metaphysical principle (supreme being, *causa sui*, etc.), but as the living Father who has entered into history in a concrete way and foretells humanity of its salvation. Moreover, faith is not man's initiative or his construction, but something that is bestowed upon him on the basis of the promise made in the gospel. The faithful believe in God as the one who really acts, who chooses his flock and thus reveals himself as a loving shepherd of his people. This faith is not construed by man; it is received without merit; it is pure grace. However, during modernity this all-encompassing religious mode of existence vanishes because faith becomes a world view. Man takes a detached, observing attitude towards the world and assigns to God a place in it as its first principle. As a consequence of this, it is up to the faithful to consider God and religion to be of (some) importance to life. Religion thus becomes a value which man has to balance against other values (like work, enjoyment, health, etc.). The crucial difference between original, authentic faith and a

modern, pious view of the world is that in the former view, faith is a human response to God's initiative, whereas in the latter view, the human subject is the exclusive point of departure on which his religious view of the world is founded. In this way, the subject can also assure himself of the certainty of faith. Concretely, this means that he chooses the world view that fits him best, or construes for himself a new eclectic world view by using elements of the existing ones. Finally, the notion 'place' as such presupposes an organizing subject, which assigns a position to everything and everyone. The result of this evolution is that religion loses its truth and reality, and turns into a religious experience. Man no longer sees God's activity in the world, but only subjectively feels his presence in the interiority of his heart. Here we see again that the well-known opposition between the God of the philosophers and scientists and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is not of decisive importance. The present-day faithful, who have turned away from all theological and philosophical speculation about God to a (anti-intellectual) religiosity of feeling, are as much victims of the loss of the gods as those who stick to philosophical theism, albeit in different ways. In short, it is obvious that *all* modern forms of religiosity have lost their authenticity ever since they conformed to the premises of the age of the world picture. They all are dominated by the loss of the gods.

On the basis of this analysis, the question arises whether in the age of the world picture, it is still possible at all to think and to speak about God in a truthful way. Heidegger is very pessimistic about the consequences of the loss of the gods: when it has come to this, the gods have fled. As said before, this failing of holy names should certainly not be identified with atheism. Rather, it announces a situation of indecision about the gods: the holy, as the element in which the gods are dwelling, human life that is completely dominated by God's grace, the experience of a world that reveals on every occasion God's activity — all these features of an authentic religious existence have vanished and left a great emptiness. Now, man himself has to decide whether or not God exists, on the importance of religion to his life, etc. However, precisely at the moment that he wants to take a decision on these issues, he notices that the things on which he has to decide withdraw and escape his controlling power. This is the situation of indecision about God and the gods. As such, it is not a decision by man, but it is something that happens to him as a destiny, as a consequence of the age of the world picture. At present, man can decide autonomously on many things, almost on everything, but not on the fact *that* he has ended up in this situation.

In this situation of indecision, all thinking about God is both *too late* and *too soon*. We should not understand the statement that our thinking about God is *too late* as a yielding to atheism or agnosticism, and even less as indifference with regard to this issue. The indecision about God is not the consequence of a conscious human decision, but the result of a certain understanding of Being which reigns in our age. In its turn, this understanding is the result of a certain destiny of Being (*Seinsgeschichte*). Once the gods have fled, man has thrown away his chances to establish an authentic relationship with God; he is too late. For the same reason, our thinking about God is *too soon*. Precisely because the loss of the gods is not the result of a human decision but happens to man as a destiny, every human attempt to put an end to this indecision high-handedly, e.g., by promoting God and religion again as valuable objects of philosophical inquiry, or by stressing again the value of faith in God, is a confirmation and strengthening of the loss of the gods rather than an overcoming of the same.

The only thing that man can do in this situation is to prepare the leeway in which the divinity can manifest itself again. Only if man lives within the boundaries of this leeway is he able to understand the original meaning of the word God. In a well-known fragment of his *Letter on Humanism* (*Brief über den Humanismus*), Heidegger goes more deeply into the nature of this leeway: "The [sort of] thinking that thinks from the question concerning the truth of Being questions more primordially than metaphysics can. Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word 'God' is to signify."²⁷ With this remark Heidegger indicates how much preparatory work has to be done in order to understand (again) the meaning of the word 'God'. In general, he describes this work as the 'overcoming of metaphysics'. As said, this is certainly not a Hegelian sublation, but a step back out of (the reign of) metaphysics into its essence; it moves from accepting metaphysics as a given construction (of which Hegel's system is one of the most prominent examples) to its deconstruction. This step back implies that metaphysical thinking is questioned from the perspective of the truth of Being as a coming to pass of unconcealment and concealment.

²⁷ M. Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus*. Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1949, pp. 36-7 [M. Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism*. In: *Idem, Pathmarks*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 267].

In this way, the construction of metaphysics loses its overwhelming, coercive character and appears as a product of its age, as a manifestation of a specific destiny of Being. As far as the question of a more authentic meaning of the word God is concerned, this thinking does not simply accept the fact of the loss of the gods as the inevitable fate of modern culture. On the contrary, it asks more primordially which conception of man and world, truth and values has brought about this destiny and why it can present itself as something unavoidable. Thus, the fate of the loss of the gods loses its coercive character.

However, the overcoming of metaphysics, as a result of which thinking again dwells in the nearness of Being, is but a first, preparatory step in order to think and tell the meaning of the word God in a more authentic way. Precisely because the danger of our thinking about God coming too soon is not yet completely over, more and different preparations are needed. Whenever man truly thinks Being, he experiences the holy. The holy, however, does not coincide with the divinity or God, but rather is the element in which the gods live and can reveal themselves to man. It is the leeway in which the divinity manifests itself. More specifically, the holy is the centre of what Heidegger in another text called the fourfold (*das Geviert*). By this he understands the four regions of the world in which earth and heaven, the divinities and the mortals gather.²⁸ All things of the world only get their authentic meaning because they dwell in these four regions and relate them to themselves. To quote a famous example of Heidegger: a jar is only most authentically a jar when one pours its contents out: water — gift of *heaven* — or wine — gift of the *earth* — to still the thirst of the *mortals* or as a sacrifice to the *gods*. With regard to the divinities, Heidegger says: "[They] are the waving heralds of the divinity. From its covert reigning the God appears in his essence, which withdraws him from every comparison with the present."²⁹ However difficult it is to interpret this cryptic text, it nevertheless shows that thinking about the holy prepares the leeway in which the God can manifest himself. The divinities do not coincide with the God, but act on behalf of him and invite the mortals to turn themselves towards him. However, the God as such shows himself in no way whatsoever to man, he withdraws from every comparison with the world. So, there is only a relation from man through the divine heralds to the God

²⁸ For this interpretation cf. J. Beaufret, Heidegger et la théologie. In: R. Kearney and J.S. O'Leary (ed.), *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*. Paris, Grasset, 1980, pp. 28-9.

²⁹ M. Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*. Pfullingen, Neske, 1954, p. 171.

himself, a relation that is marked by the interplay of concealment and unconcealment.

In sum, the preparations that are needed to help man in making the transition from the reign of the loss of the gods to a more authentic relationship to God come down to the following. God can only be thought after the divinity has been thought, and the divinity in its turn can only be thought starting from the essence of the holy. Thus, both the question of the divinities inviting the mortals in the fourfold, and the question of the withdrawal of God in the loss of the gods can only be asked in an authentic, original way if one begins from the leeway of the holy. However, man can only get access to this leeway when the openness of Being has been laid open by a commemorative thinking, and when he commemoratively dwells in the openness of Being. Here, Heidegger means that thinking God and thinking Being lie in each other's nearness: man should put himself under the claim of Being in order to think the holy, and only starting from this leeway can he think the divinity and, eventually, God.

No matter how one judges Heidegger's thinking about God, it is clear that he does not only take distance from the representing way of thinking of onto-theology, but from Christian theology as well, which starts from God's self-revealing Logos in the world. Also, the stress on the holy as the element in which the divinity dwells is at odds with the Christian God, who precisely desacralizes the world. Rather, his thinking on this issue is related to the poet Hölderlin, who reads the Gospel without forgetting Greek myths, which, in his eyes, are as holy as the Gospels themselves.³⁰ Heidegger, himself, acknowledges that in the passage from the *Letter on Humanism*, cited above, he speaks only about the god of the poet and not about the God of Christian revelation.³¹

4. Thinking beyond the loss of the gods?

As is common knowledge, Heidegger's thinking has been of great influence on the ongoing discussions in continental philosophy, as the works of all the authors that are discussed in this book prove. This

³⁰ Cf. F. Fédier, Heidegger et Dieu. In: R. Kearney and J.S. O'Leary (ed.), *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, p. 45.

³¹ Dialogue avec Martin Heidegger (Record of a session of the Evangelical Academy of December 1953 in Hofgeismar). In: R. Kearney and J.S. O'Leary (ed.), *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, p. 336.

indebtedness to Heidegger particularly concerns his deconstruction of onto-theology. When we take into account the radicalness of this deconstruction, how should we interpret the fact that these authors nevertheless want to bring up questions about God and religion in their philosophies? From Heidegger's rather pessimistic perspective, this is highly problematic. Don't the thinkers discussed in this book too easily disregard his warning that in an age in which the gods have fled, all thinking about God is necessarily too soon? Do they listen to his imploring words that in our age it is more appropriate to remain silent about God?³² And even if the ideas of these thinkers are timely, have they really listened to Heidegger's urgent claim that God should be thought within the domain of the holy since, in his view, this is the only realm in which the divine and the divinity can appear again? To put it in different terms: do these thinkers succeed in finding a realm that is not dominated by the fate of the loss of the gods in which God can be thought and talked about in a new and more authentic way? Or do they fail to take into account this whole issue, thus falling back in the onto-theological way of thinking, which Heidegger precisely tried to overcome? Of course, a complete answer to these intriguing questions, which would also pursue in greater depth the major differences between the thinkers of this book, greatly exceeds the scope of this introduction. Therefore, I will start with a short analysis of their attitude with regard to the problem of onto-theology. I will show that their work can be seen as a continuation of Heidegger's deconstruction of onto-theology. This common frame of reference offers an adequate point of departure to analyze the critique of these thinkers on Heidegger's new approach to think God in the neighbourhood of Being. In particular, I will point to the fundamental objections that his preparations for a new kind of thinking about the holy and the divinity call for in the work of Levinas, Derrida, Marion, and Lacoste. The reason for these objections is certainly not any hidden attempt on their part to revive onto-theology, but rather the conviction that Heidegger's deconstruction of it is not radical enough. In sum, the ambivalent attitude of these thinkers to Heidegger is an important motive in contemporary French thinking about God and religion, and can be interpreted as a way of freeing thinking from the fate of the loss of the gods.

³² "[M]etaphysics is onto-theo-logy. Someone who has experienced theology in his own roots, both the theology of the Christian faith and that of philosophy, would today rather remain silent about God when he is speaking in the realm of thinking." M. Heidegger, *Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik*, p. 51 [M. Heidegger, *The onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics*, pp. 54-5].

In the work of Ricoeur, the influence of Heidegger's critique of onto-theology plays a major role in his struggle with the tradition of reflective philosophy. Its discourse is characterized by universality, univocity, and unity and, as such, it is opposed to the plurality, equivocality, and particularity of the myths. Philosophy sets itself the task of revealing the universal and rational structure which is hidden in the plurality of individual myths and symbols, such as they appear in all religions. This means that in his philosophy of religion, Ricoeur departs from the religious symbols, not from natural theology and its onto-theological implications. The consequence of this approach is not only an enlargement, but also a qualitative change of reflective consciousness. More specifically, it puts the point of departure of reflective philosophy, *viz.*, autonomous thinking, under pressure. With regard to the thinking of God, this crisis becomes manifest in the incapability of reflective philosophy to think the essence of what faith is all about, the Wholly Other who addresses and questions us. Philosophy is situated on the level of immanence and, therefore, it cannot say anything about vertical transcendence. Although reflective philosophy cannot simply be put on a par with Heidegger's concept of onto-theology, there are nevertheless important connections between them. In this regard, we especially have to keep in mind the ideals of rationality, universality and univocity, and the central position of the subject, which reflective philosophy and onto-theology have in common. According to Ricoeur, they are manifestations of the hubris of philosophy. His argument ends in a rehabilitation of non-speculative language, a way of thinking without the totalizing and foundational pretensions of traditional metaphysics. In making this claim, his thought obviously echoes Heidegger's deconstruction of onto-theology.

The work of Girard, too, can be read as a critique of onto-theology, although it should be said that he is closer to Heidegger's philosophy of culture, including his critique of modernity, than to his thinking of Being. As we saw in the previous section, onto-theology is one of the ways in which the loss of the gods has become manifest in our age. From Girard's perspective, onto-theology is a thinking of identity, annihilating the difference between Being and the beings, and reducing God to a being, albeit the supreme being. This comes down to a negation of God's transcendence. In an age in which the world has become a picture, God, too, is conceived after the example of a representational and manageable picture. Thus, in modernity, both the external mediation of mythical religion and the transcendence of the Christian God fail. The only thing left is an internal mediation as the cause of the intrinsically

aggressive character of modern culture which sacrifices nature, the other, and man himself. This idea of modernity parallels Heidegger's critique of calculative thinking. In this sense, Girard's critique of the internal mediation of modern culture and its negation of God's transcendence is a culture-philosophical translation of Heidegger's criticism of the philosophy of identity or subjectivity, which has come to the fore in the age of the loss of the gods.

The critique of onto-theology also plays a crucial role in the writings of Levinas. He links it to the issue of atheism, which serves as a point of departure for his thinking about God. In this context, the concept 'atheism' refers to a position that precedes both the negation and the affirmation of the divine. More concretely, it is the radical rejection of every thinking that aims at conceiving God in terms of a participation in man's doings and goings-on, as well as in terms of any participation in Being. The last, meaningful sentence of the preface of his book, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*), clearly shows that Levinas takes Heidegger's critique of onto-theology (although Heidegger does not identify this with atheism) as the point of departure for his own thinking: "To hear a God not contaminated by Being is a human possibility no less important and no less precarious than to bring Being out of the oblivion in which it is said to have fallen in metaphysics and in onto-theology."³³ From this 'atheistic' perspective, Levinas tries to think a God who does not coincide with the (supreme) being, but is precisely otherwise than Being. Thus he reacts, just like Heidegger, against every way of thinking that has the pretension of being able to thematize God and reduce Him to an object of representing thinking. Levinas concretely has in mind the major representatives of the metaphysical tradition, such as Aristotle, Spinoza, and Hegel. In one way or another they annihilate God's incomprehensible infinity by fitting him into a totalizing system. As a consequence, these philosophers overpower God's transcendence and ignore the infinite difference between man and God. By conceiving God within the network of Being, they also create the impression that man, as a thinking and acting being, is the unique starting point of all initiative in the world; as such, he is convinced that he can never be disturbed, thrown off his balance, or displaced by the intrusion of the infinite.

³³ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Dordrecht, Kluwer, 1978, p. X [E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, The Hague/Boston/London, Nijhoff Publishers, 1981, p. xliii].

Derrida's thinking, too, is tributary to Heidegger's on many points. He even acknowledges that none of the ideas he tries to develop would have been possible without the questions that Heidegger raised.³⁴ With regard to the issues coming up in this book, he endeavours in his works to deconstruct the onto-theological representation of God as supreme being. He radicalizes the problematic presuppositions of onto-theology by situating them in the larger context of logocentrism, which dominates Western thought. The term logocentrism refers to a way of thinking in which truth is of a spiritual nature and, thus, is, in principle, present for the mind's eye. Within logocentrism, God functions as the transcendental referent, warranting a stable meaning for all our speaking and thinking. God ensures the fact that neither confusion nor constantly changing perspectives deregulate our thinking, but that we, in principle, can rely on an objective truth and a stable world. Derrida's intention is not so much to radically refuse this onto-theological and logocentric way of thinking, but to show that it rests on an unfounded prejudice, viz., God as the point of unification, being the source of all sense and meaning. The onto-theological God appears here as the condition of possibility for thinking reality in terms of presence, representability, and objectivity.

Lyotard's 'hidden philosophy of religion' can be taken as an indirect answer to Derrida's question 'how not to speak about God?'. It consists of experimenting with three different new strategies of simultaneously speaking about God and keeping silent about Him, viz., speaking indirectly, speaking with a forked tongue, and ventriloquism. Lyotard's strategy rests upon his basic contention that God cannot be an object of metaphysical thinking, as onto-theology had always presumed. On the contrary, the absolute can only be present in human discourse in a repressed way, thus inevitably transforming and destabilizing it. He illustrates this by focusing on Augustine's narrative of his conversion in the *Confessions*. Lyotard shows that Augustine is not the ultimate subject in the story of his conversion, as onto-theology would contend, but that he (just like every other human being) is the product of the discourse and the writings of God as the radical other; it only gradually becomes his own discourse in a lifelong process of conversion. In sum,

³⁴ J. Derrida, *Positions*, Paris, Minuit, 1972, p. 18 [J. Derrida, *Positions*, London, Athlone Press, 1987, p. 9]. For an intriguing insight into the backgrounds of Derrida's ambivalent attitude to Heidegger cf. D. Janicaud, Jacques Derrida, *Entretiens du 1^{er} juillet au 22 novembre 1999*, In: Idem, *Heidegger en France. II. Entretiens*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2001, pp. 89-126, esp. p. 103.

being converted implies that God reshapes my existence completely. It is not me who speaks, but God himself speaks in my speaking.

Henry's idiosyncratic primal phenomenology can also be interpreted in the light of Heidegger's critique of onto-theology. According to him, there is a structural relationship between a radical phenomenology and Christianity, since both begin from a showing, manifesting, revealing. The decisive characteristic of revelation is that it cannot be reduced to the revelation of 'something', as happens in Husserl's phenomenology, but rather, in a first moment, revelation reveals itself. In Christian religion this immediacy especially shows itself in God's self-manifestation, in the "I am who am." This original immediacy of God's self-manifestation has to be distinguished from the creed of God's revelation as a crucial element of Christian philosophical-theological tradition and a historically developed church. In Henry's view, the essence of Christianity cannot be represented and is therefore at odds with any theoretical mediation and symbolic representation. God is life itself, not life that is constantly reduced to something other than itself. This implies that God certainly cannot be conceived in terms of Being, as happens in onto-theology.

As far as Marion is concerned, he bases his thinking about God both on Heidegger's critique of the confusion of the question of Being and of God, and on Levinas's objections to the contamination of God by Being. This already becomes apparent if one looks at the title of his startling book *God without Being* (*Dieu sans l'être*). Marion uses the twin concepts idol and icon to clarify and balance this issue. Idol refers to a human experience of the holy; it represents the holy as seen only from a human point of view. The view fixates, and the idol is precisely the point where the movement of the view stops and fixates itself. As far as philosophy is concerned, this attitude refers to a way of thinking about God in terms of 'construct' and 'concept', of which onto-theology is a striking example. As a concept, God is no longer infinite or incomprehensible, but is being fixated within the boundaries of the human capacity of representing. In accordance with Heidegger's critique of onto-theology, Marion writes: "The conceptual idol has a site, metaphysics; a function, the theo-logy in onto-theo-logy; and a definition, *causa sui*. Conceptual idolatry does not remain a universally vague suspicion, but inscribes itself in the global strategy of thought taken in its metaphysical figure."³⁵

³⁵ J.L. Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1982, p. 56
[J.L. Marion, *God without Being. Hors-Texte*. Chicago, University Press of Chicago, 1991, p. 36].

Therefore, a way of thinking about God that is not affected by idolatry implies that we should think about God outside the purview of metaphysics.

As for Lacoste, he explains the consequences of Heidegger's critique of onto-theology for theology in a short, dense dictionary-article devoted to Heidegger. Heidegger's phrases "confirm the death of the God of the philosophers [...], and ask for a purely theological reconstruction of the-ology. [...]" Thus, the task for theology is double: on the one hand, it is liberating itself from all relations with metaphysics, and, on the other hand, it is dissociating its destiny from the kind of thinking that, after metaphysics, tries to receive the truth of Being."³⁶ If theology does not take on this task, it runs the risk of disposing God of his divinity.

The previous paragraphs show that the authors discussed in this book implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the importance of Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics as onto-theology. In this way, he laid bare more clearly than anybody else the weak point of traditional metaphysical thinking about God. Moreover, I pointed out that Heidegger's influence on contemporary French thinking is not restricted to the issue of onto-theology in the strict sense, but also relates to the analysis and critique of modern culture, especially the reign of calculative rationality, truth as objective certainty, man as a subject, and values as a human construction. Nevertheless, these authors refuse to comply with Heidegger's call for temporarily keeping silent about God because our thinking of Him would be too soon. They also do not agree with his suggestion that thinking should restrict itself to preparing the leeway in which the holy could appear again. How should this aspect of their attitude to Heidegger be interpreted? Why do they seemingly only follow his path of thinking half-way? What is wrong with his statement that we are only able to think God or the gods appropriately in the nearness of Being, from the realm of the holy? In order to find an answer to these complex questions, I want to examine how Levinas, Derrida, Marion, and Lacoste, in particular, react to this aspect of Heidegger's thinking.

As I already showed in my analysis of the quotation from the preface of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas's point of departure is a radical rejection of all thinking that conceives God in terms of participation in and community with Being. At first sight, he seems to be in accordance with Heidegger's project to free Being from the forgetfulness in which it has

³⁶ J.-Y. Lacoste, Heidegger. In: J.-Y. Lacoste, *Dictionnaire critique de théologie*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1998, pp. 522-3.

fallen under the influence of metaphysics and onto-theology. But in the same sentence of this quotation he places his own project "to hear a God not contaminated by Being" next to Heidegger's as "a human possibility no less important and no less precarious."³⁷ What does Levinas mean by this human possibility, and how does it relate to Heidegger's thinking of Being? At the outset of the second part of his book *God, death and time* (*Dieu, la mort et le temps*) entitled *God and onto-theo-logy* (*Dieu et l'onto-théo-logie*), he enters into this issue in detail. Just like Heidegger, he considers the onto-theological character of metaphysics not as something standing alone, but as an important aspect of the historical manifestation of Being. In accordance with the analysis presented above, Being manifests itself in modernity as a world picture of which instrumental rationality, truth as certainty, being as representation, and man as subject are the constitutive elements. In his earlier work, Levinas summarizes, in a certain way, this age under the heading 'totality'. However, the way in which he wants to overcome onto-theology fundamentally differs from Heidegger's. He asks whether "the mistake of onto-theology consist[s] in taking Being for God, or rather in taking God for Being."³⁸ 'Taking Being for God' occurs when representing thinking reduces the essential openness of the history of Being, i.e., Being as an inextricable intertwining of concealment and unconcealment. As a result of this, thinking understands Being as ('takes Being for') the supreme being, God, who can be represented and thus controlled by the subject. On the other hand, however, 'taking God for Being' means that philosophy conceives God exclusively in terms of ('takes Him for') Being. In this way, philosophy definitively precludes for itself the possibility of understanding God as otherwise than Being.

With regard to this issue, Levinas thinks of something very specific: if philosophy takes God for Being, this inevitably implies that Being becomes the ultimate source of sense. This shuts the door to a radically transcendent sense, that is to say, a sense intruding into earthly Being from outside or above, a sense that does not find its origin in the order of 'sameness' but in the incommensurable Other. Levinas's thinking as such aims at showing that an authentic sense-giving thinking, i.e., thinking that looks for a primordial, absolute sense, necessarily implies the explosion or the subversion of Being, since Being itself and the sense of

Being, as Heidegger already noticed, only manifest themselves as a contingent history of beings and a heterogeneous multiplicity of senses. So, what is actually at stake in Levinas's philosophical project to oppose God to onto-theology is to conceive a new, absolute notion of sense which cannot but lie radically at the other side of Being. This implies that neither onto-theology nor Heidegger's thinking of Being can give access to this primordial layer of sense. We can only trace it through ethics as the unconditional appeal of the radically Other to me. With this, Levinas wants to tell us the following: in spite of his sustained effort (which Levinas appreciates) to overcome metaphysics, Heidegger remains indebted to western metaphysics, which reduces the absolute, transcendent sense of God to the historical understanding of the Being of beings since, according to Heidegger, it is only in the nearness of Being that the holy and the divinity announce themselves.³⁹

Levinas still phrases this complex issue in another way: "Is thinking God by way of onto-theo-logy the wrong way of thinking about Being (the Heideggerian thesis), or is it the wrong way of thinking about God? Does not God signify *the beyond Being*? (Now that is what, for Heidegger, would be scarcely defensible, although there is a philosophical tradition — Platonic and Plotinian — of thinking of a God beyond Being)."⁴⁰ Does Levinas take here the view of a theologian who wants to save the God of the Bible from the hands of philosophical thinking? By no means! His approach is entirely philosophical. He asks for a primordial sense, which is radically transcendent with regard to the ever fluctuating play of diverging sense-contexts, which is characteristic for the Being of beings. According to Heidegger, this fluctuating play is the historical coming to pass of Being, which is the origin of all sense in the world. Going into the sense of Being (an expression that Heidegger often uses) implies that thinking accepts the claim of the coming to pass of Being and expresses its sense. Levinas, however, states that there is a primordial sense which lies beyond the contingency and historicity of the Being of beings; it cannot but lie at the other side of Being, and in that sense goes back to God as the radically Other. This again shows that what is philosophically at stake for Levinas fundamentally differs from Heidegger's philosophical agenda. Levinas does not want to safeguard the sense of the coming to pass of Being against the metaphysical idea

³⁹ E. Levinas, *De la signification du sens*. In: R. Kearney and J.S. O'Leary (ed.), *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, p. 239.

⁴⁰ E. Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, pp. 143-4 [E. Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, no. 126-7].

³⁷ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. X [E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. xliii].

³⁸ E. Levinas, *Dieu, la mort et le temps*. Paris, Grasset, 1993, p. 141 [E. Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 124].

of God as a representational, supreme being. Rather, he tries to prevent Being from absorbing all sense, implying no room would be left any more for a primordial sense which radically transcends Being. He thus not only repudiates (together with Heidegger) traditional metaphysics, but also rejects (in opposition to Heidegger) the commemorative thinking of Being, which thinks more originally than metaphysics does. So, in Levinas's view, Heidegger's overcoming of metaphysics by a commemorative thinking of Being should itself be overcome in order to be able to think the intrusion of a primordial, transcendent sense, the Word of God as the radical Other, in the order of 'sameness' (Being). For Levinas, 'putting an end to onto-theology' therefore necessarily also implies taking a distance from Heidegger's commemorative thinking of Being.

Just like Levinas, Derrida also recognizes his indebtedness to Heidegger's analysis of the intimate relationship between the metaphysics of presence and onto-theology. But, again, just like Levinas, he also mentions a distance (*écart*) between his own thinking and Heidegger's, albeit of a completely different nature than the abyss separating Heidegger from Levinas. Derrida shows that Heidegger, in spite of all his efforts, does not completely succeed in escaping from metaphysical thinking; formulated in a positive way, this means that he sometimes remains the prisoner of onto-theology. Well, surely Derrida does not want to monopolize the merit of having overcome metaphysics and onto-theology completely. This, perhaps, is impossible, in principle. But he notices that in the work of Heidegger, there are a lot of hidden ambiguities, suggesting a metaphysical rest.

Derrida offers an example of his deconstruction of the metaphysical rest in Heidegger's (post-metaphysical) commemorative thinking of Being in his commentary of the *Letter on Humanism*. More specifically, he analyzes the passage quoted in the previous section in which Heidegger discusses the possibility of a more original thinking of the divinity and God, starting from the dimension of the holy.⁴¹ According to Derrida, "in Heidegger's discourse, [one can observe a] dominance of an entire metaphysics of proximity, of simple and immediate presence, a metaphysics associating the proximity of Being with the values of neighbouring, shelter, house, service, guard, voice, and listening. As goes

without saying, this is not an insignificant rhetoric."⁴² Nearness is also the leading metaphor in Heidegger's speaking about the divinity and God: one need only to think of his statement that we can only experience a relation of the divinity to man from the perspective of the truth of Being. According to Derrida, it obviously does not hold to turn Heidegger into a veiled metaphysician, thinking God in terms of representability, presence and supreme being. The nearness that comes up here is not an ontic, but an ontological nearness, that is to say, it pertains to the sort of metaphors Heidegger uses to describe the relation between God and man. For Derrida, the use of one metaphor rather than another is, nevertheless, meaningful. It shows that Heidegger's radical deconstruction of the predominance of presence in metaphysics only aims at urging us to think the presence of the present.

Concretely, Derrida thinks of all kinds of ontological nearness in Heidegger's text — such as man living in the nearness of Being, the theme of homeland (*Heimat*) and homelessness (*Heimatlosigkeit*), man as the shepherd of Being — as standing in the claim of Being, and man's appropriation of the destiny of Being. Particularly as far as this last element is concerned, Derrida points at the relative ease with which Heidegger passes from 'near' (French: *proche*) to 'proper' (French: *propre*). He surely does not want to accuse Heidegger's use of the term 'proper' of referring to one or another transcendental property of man and of thus falling back in a metaphysical way of thinking. But it is clear that Heidegger's notion of the 'proper' points to an involvement of the sense of Being in the sense of man and vice versa: "Man is the proper of Being, which right near him whispers in his ear; Being is the proper of man, such is the truth that speaks, such is the proposition which gives the *there* of the truth of Being and the truth of man. [...] The proper of man, his *Eigenheit*, his 'authenticity', is to be related to the meaning of Being; he is to hear and to question (*fragen*) it in ek-sistence, to stand straight in the proximity of its light."⁴³

With regard to the important issue of the nearness of Being to man, and the way in which he appropriates the sense of Being, Derrida's deconstruction results in an ambivalent position. He certainly does not want to reject Heidegger's line of thought as such, if only because he is convinced that it is impossible to step out of metaphysics and onto-theology 'just like that'. But, by laying his finger on the unreflected evidence of the

⁴² Ibid., p. 156 [Ibid., p. 130].

⁴³ Ibid., p. 160 [Ibid., p. 133].

⁴¹ Cf. for Derrida's commentary: J. Derrida, *Les fins de l'homme*. In: *Idem, Marges de la philosophie*. Paris, Minuit, 1972, pp. 129-164, especially pp. 153ff. [J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 109-136, especially pp. 128ff.].

nearness of Being to man, he shows a metaphysical rest which has escaped to the attention of Heidegger's commemorative thinking. Even more precisely, Heidegger's destruction of onto-theology has resuscitated this evidence, which had been long forgotten. Under this destruction, executed by his 'commemorative thinking', an even more original layer of meaning comes to light, namely, the nearness of man and Being. Well, Derrida wonders whether this evidence in our times doesn't get derailed. This derailment surely is not a consequence of some human decision, but can only come from an externality outside the realm that is common to man and Being. This externality lies outside the circle of light that the sense of Being casts upon the beings because it is as such the condition of possibility of the sense of Being. In his later texts, Derrida calls this externality, which he relates to death and violence, God. It does not coincide with Heidegger's God who becomes manifest in the realm of the holy and the sense of Being. For Derrida, the term God is an indication of the extra-sensible, difference, and deferral. This also makes clear that the orientation of Derrida's commentary on Heidegger goes in a completely different direction than Levinas's. The main concern for Levinas is to save God, who is otherwise than Being, from the totalizing take-over by Heidegger's thinking of Being, in short, from ontology. Derrida, in contrast, questions the evidence of the nearness of Being, God, and man in order to safeguard the differential character of Being (the ontological difference), that is to say, the alterity, the openness, the indecision, the deferral, the infinite distance, the dissociation, etc.⁴⁴

Marion's interpretation of Heidegger builds on the line of thought of Levinas and Derrida. In his book *God without Being*, he examines Heidegger's 'new beginning' in which Heidegger sets himself the task of thinking a divine God or at least preparing the leeway for this. In this context, Marion sharply criticizes the contested passage in Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism* on the possibility of thinking God from the dimension of Being and in relation to the fourfold (*das Geviert*). Marion thinks that, for Heidegger, the truth about God can only come from the realm from which truth unconceals itself, namely, from Being, its enframing and its openness. Thus, Being precedes God. This leads Marion to the conclusion that there is a second sort of idolatry which is typical of the thinking of Being as such, and which is even more problematic than the first kind of idolatry, which is characteristic for

⁴⁴ Cf. D. Janicaud, Jacques Derrida. Entretiens, pp. 118-9.

metaphysics as onto-theology (see above).⁴⁵ On the basis of this, he gives a penetrating commentary on Heidegger's well-known and often repeated remark that the faithful man, precisely because of his certainty of faith, is perhaps able to *conceive* the philosophical question of Being, but is never capable to fully *commit* himself to it, because of his inevitably faithful interpretation of this question. Marion reverses this reproach and points it towards Heidegger. "Assured of the precomprehension of every possible 'God' as being and of his determination by the anterior instance of Being, Heidegger can well conceive and formulate the question of God (without quotation marks) but can never seriously commit himself to it."⁴⁶

Lacoste, too, gives critical comments precisely on this passage of Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, especially as far as the consequences of his thought for Christian theology are concerned. "The transcendence of God yields to the transcendence of Being and its governance; and the kind of theology that takes its place [...] thus is supremely atheological. [...] The central role that Heidegger attributes to 'serenity' (*Gelassenheit*), in absence of all hope; the subordination of God to a sacredness without a face; a writing on the history of philosophy, in which every Christian reference is left out — these and other features should allow us to affirm that theology has nothing to learn here, except that which it is not at all. Which is, by the way, a very useful lesson."⁴⁷ Lacoste's harsh reaction against the very possibility of making Heidegger's thinking of Being productive for theology shows, in an exemplary way, the attitude of a whole number of contemporary French theologians.⁴⁸

In this section I have shown the ambivalent attitude that is characteristic for Levinas, Derrida, Marion, and Lacoste with regard to Heidegger's thinking of Being. The enormous merit of Heidegger's critique of onto-theology for contemporary philosophy and theology should not conceal that his new beginning, his attempt to formulate a more original (and in his view also more truthful) thinking about God, evokes some fundamental objections. The four authors discussed in this section are not the only ones to raise these questions. Some others also have serious

⁴⁵ J.L. Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*, p. 65 [J.L. Marion, *God without Being*, p. 41].

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9 [*Ibid.*, p. 43]. On Marion's attitude to Heidegger cf. also: D. Janicaud, Jean-Luc Marion. Entretien du 3 décembre 1999. In: D. Janicaud, *Heidegger en France II*, pp. 210-227.

⁴⁷ J.-Y. Lacoste, *Heidegger*, p. 523.

⁴⁸ Cf. D. Janicaud, *Heidegger en France I*, p. 480.

problems with Heidegger's thinking concerning this issue. For Girard, Heidegger's notion of holy Being is nothing other than the product of the violence between people. Ricoeur, too, wonders at the fact that Heidegger constantly avoided the confrontation of his thinking about a divine God with Hebrew thinking, whereas the latter, precisely because of its relation to the other and to justice, fundamentally differs from Greek philosophical discourse. In the previous section, I already indicated how much Heidegger's thinking about God is indebted to Hölderlin and his admiration of or nostalgia for the world of the gods of ancient Greece, but pays no attention at all to the God of the Bible. According to Ricoeur, Heidegger's step back out of metaphysics does not adequately take into account the main dimensions of Western philosophical and cultural traditions. In his view, Heidegger fails to recognize "the radical Hebrew dimension of Christianity, which is primarily rooted in Judaism and only afterwards in the Greek tradition."⁴⁹

5. Conclusion

The chapters of this book present and analyze the lively discussions that are taking place in contemporary French philosophy about the issues of God and religion. The purpose of this introduction was, in the first place, to explain some important elements of the common frame of reference within which they are pursued. The question that did not come up in this introduction is the following: does God feel at home in France?⁵⁰ To put it more precisely, do the thinkers presented in this book cast a renewing light on the God of religion and are they thus contributing to a fruitful development of theology? The interest, from the perspective wherein this question is raised, is primarily a religious and theological one. As such, it differs from the perspectives of most of the authors being introduced in this book, who are mainly philosophers. This is the reason why I objected in the second section of this introduction to an all-too simplistic interpretation of contemporary

⁴⁹ P. Ricoeur, Note introductive. In: R. Kearney and J.S. O'Leary (ed.), *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, p. 17. Cf. also Derrida's remark on this issue in: D. Janicaud, Jacques Derrida. *Entretiens*, pp. 119.

⁵⁰ In this context, it is important to notice that the expression 'living like God in France' means in Dutch, French, and German 'living in clover', 'having a place in the sun'. I have this connotation in mind when I ask whether God feels at home in France.

French philosophy as a turn to theology or religion. Therefore, the aim of this introduction cannot be to fully answer the question whether God feels at home in contemporary French thinking, or, formulated differently, to judge the theological or religious relevance of such thinking. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that the work of the thinkers discussed in this book does imply a serious challenge to (Christian) religion and theology. This also becomes apparent from the fact that their ideas are being discussed vigorously by many contemporary theologians. The work of Lacoste is only one example of this. Therefore, at the end of this introduction, I want to point to two issues that can be gathered from the various chapters of this book and which, in my view, are of extraordinary importance to present-day religious thinking.

First, there is the question how God's transcendence should be thought in order to prevent Him from falling under the dominance of philosophical thinking of Being, or, to put it differently, in order to prevent Him from becoming an idol, a product of man's imagination. Levinas brings up this issue when he thinks God as a trace, as the one who has absolutely 'passed by'. This idea of God refers to His revelation to Moses in Ex. 33. For theology, this implies that it should always realize that, inevitably, God remains a mystery. Therefore, it should stay loyal to its vocation of being a self-removing discourse about God. Derrida radicalizes this notion of the trace by thinking God as difference and death. By doing so, he spikes the guns of every thinking that approaches God as positivity and definability. In his view, both Heidegger (God in the nearness of Being) and Levinas (God as the trace of the Other) are not yet radical enough. If God occurs, this can only happen in an ungodly way, that is to say, in a human, phenomenal, phenomenological way. Or, in other words, he can only appear as affected by context, relation, background, perspectivism. Lyotard takes a similar stance with regard to this issue as he takes up Derrida's question on how not to speak about God. Marion also discusses this issue extensively via his phenomenological analysis of idol and icon. In opposition to Derrida, however, he explicitly joins in this respect the Christian tradition but without wanting to give up his philosophical perspective. Thinking about Christ as the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), he states that the icon deals with a presence, which is of a different nature than the presence of an object. Of course, these ways of thinking God as absolutely transcendent, especially as far as Derrida and Levinas are concerned, give rise to many problems, especially with regard to the

problem of incarnation. Ricoeur argues that we cannot know anything at all about a completely absolute Other. If we are unable to experience the totally Other in his radical otherness, we are unable to think or speak about him at all, either philosophically or religiously. Girard, too, tries to make clear with the help of cultural anthropology that both a vertical transcendence, which enlarges the distance between man and God so much that they do not touch each other anymore, and a horizontal transcendence, which causes these two spheres of influence to overlap more or less, create insurmountable problems. Finally, in Henry's radical phenomenology, as a search for the roots of appearing itself, the issue of transcendence takes a new turn again. In opposition to the traditional emphasis on God's transcendence both in philosophy and theology, he stresses the immanence of God's manifestation. In his view, God is Life as such, and reveals Himself from Himself, not as something else, without any exteriority. This approach of (God's) immanence also puts an end to every dialectical relation with transcendence. From the perspective of radical phenomenology, God's essence is his (immanent) self-experience. Well, however diverging all these reflections about God's transcendence are, they give theology a lot to think about, such as the logos about God, the doctrine of incarnation, Christian ethics, etc.

This leads us to a second set of problems with important consequences for theology, namely, the more general methodological question regarding which sources (systematic) theology can draw upon in order to think God and (elements of) Christian religion. In opposition to most traditional forms of natural theology, and in spite of the fact that he is a philosopher himself, Levinas explicitly values the classic texts of his Jewish tradition as authentic sources of philosophical reflection about God. With regard to this, his position is similar to philosophical hermeneutics, which turned away from foundational thinking and tried to think God by means of a philosophical reflection of elements coming from religious traditions and other extra-philosophical sources. Concretely, Levinas concentrates on an attentive reading of the Talmud and the Jewish Bible. However, he strictly separates this reading from his philosophical work. The work of Ricoeur, too, offers a major contribution to this issue. His work *The Rule of Metaphor (La métaphore vive)* can be read as an emancipation of perception and imagination from reflective thinking. As a consequence of this, he pays a lot of attention to the specific expressiveness of religious stories and symbols. They 'give to think' and in that sense they precede philosophy. As a literary

theorist, Girard, too, opts for such an approach, with the particular purpose of discovering the specificity of Christianity. By means of a comparison of the essential stories of diverging religious traditions, he tries to give a philosophical characterization of Christianity and its essential difference with mythical religions and modern culture. The renewed attention for God is also combined with a renewed interest for and new accents in phenomenology. Besides hermeneutics, phenomenology is an important challenge for theological thinking. Of course, we should keep in mind in the first place the work of Ricoeur, but also the recent works of Marion and Henry deserve to be mentioned in this respect. Marion's central question is how the givenness of God should be thought philosophically. In numerous ways, Christianity shows itself to be a religion of a gift that cannot be objectified. This, of course, primarily holds true for Christ himself, but in a derived sense it is also true for the Gospel as Good Tidings, for love and charity. In his work, Henry offers a phenomenological analysis of this structure of immediacy and connects it to his phenomenological reduction of Christianity. All these examples show that these philosophers point to the crucial importance of extra-philosophical elements, such as religious stories and symbols, in order to think God. Of course, this not only holds true for philosophy, but also for systematic theology.

With this, I have indicated two important sets of problems, viz., the specific question of God's transcendence and the more general methodological question of how to think God adequately. Both are of vital importance to religious thought in our times. Of course, the various chapters of this book deal with these problems in a much more detailed and subtle way than this introduction. By briefly indicating them here I did not want to give a definitive answer to whether or not God feels at home in France. I have only given a first impression of the particularly interesting lines that can be drawn between the works of the thinkers that are discussed in this book on the one hand, and Christian religion and theology on the other hand. In an often surprising and sometimes even challenging way, these thinkers take up elements from the Jewish and Christian traditions in order to use them for a clarification of their own philosophical questions. By doing so, they shed a new light on current philosophical problems. Apparently, religion remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration for philosophy, even in an age of indecision about God. But precisely because these thinkers bring up religious ideas in a strange context and from less obvious perspectives, they also shed a new light on religion and theology. It would not be correct to use the

medieval image of philosophy as the handmaid of theology to characterize this mutual relationship between contemporary French philosophy and theology. Rather, thinking about these questions offers to both philosophy and theology an opportunity for a crossover, which is mutually enriching. This book hopes to offer a contribution to this fascinating process.